

Vietnamese bloggers initiate a unique campaign for freedom of expression

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Rights

Defenders

As Vietnam is seeking a seat in the UN Human Rights Council for 2014-2016, the authorities are tightening the restrictions of the right to freedom of expression on the Internet through new regulations and peaceful activists are arrested, threatened and harassed. Dinh Nhat Uy is one of them. He is facing several years in prison for posting criticism of the government on the Internet and for protesting against the imprisonment of his brother and another blogger.

Civil Rights Defenders calls on the international community to increase the pressure on the Vietnam government to uphold its international obligations and reform or repeal repressive legislation. Over a hundred Vietnamese bloggers have done just that. They are drawing the attention to the right to freedom of expression in general and article 258 in the Vietnamese penal code in particular. In a statement, they highlight that article 258 is a breach of the freedom of expression, and should be repealed. The campaign, one of the most sophisticated human rights campaigns that Vietnam has ever seen, has had wide visibility, both at home and abroad.

Article 258 provides against “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organisations and/or citizens,” such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. The vague wording opens for arbitrary interpretation and imposes a serious threat to the rights for freedom of expression. Only in June 2013, police arrested three bloggers under Article 258, including **Dinh Nhat Uy**. He is accused of insulting the judiciary through critical status updates on Facebook. Dinh Nhat Uy is facing charges of offending the state, under article 258. In the statement, the bloggers argue the article is inconsistent with Vietnam’s candidacy to the UN Human Rights Council, as it is in breach of Vietnam’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

On 1 September, a new regulation, called decree 72, entered into force. Decree 72 tightens the state’s grip further on freedom of expression and freedom of information on Internet, and risks silencing voices that the authorities don’t tolerate. Decree 72 is vaguely worded and holds that social media, including blogs, only can be used for “personal information” and bans users from posting news articles and links.

Freedom Online Coalition is a network of countries, including Sweden, which promotes freedom of expression on the Internet. The Coalition is one of many organisations that have expressed concerns about decree 72, underscoring it does not comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is in breach of Vietnam’s obligations under the ICCPR.

The bloggers network has also delivered their statement to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bangkok, where they presented their reservations against article 258 and highlighted cases of imprisoned bloggers.

The group has continued disseminating the statement, and also paid visits to several embassies to discuss the article and its consequences, including the Swedish and the German embassies. To ensure safe passage of the bloggers after their visit, the German embassy offered the group to go home in an embassy car. They also let them upload pictures from the visit before leaving the embassy, to make sure that they would not lose them if should the police confiscate their cameras. The Swedish embassy invited the group to the home of an embassy staff before departure.

Civil Rights Defenders believes that the new laws and regulations place the relatively vibrant blogosphere at further risk. In a one-party-state, where all the media is controlled by the state and a third of the population is online, the blogosphere has come to play an important role as an alternative voice, monitoring those in power. The bloggers network shows that they have the capacity to shape public opinion and create a discussion about freedom of expression. Now, decree 72 risks turning the clock back.

Therefore Civil Rights Defenders also believes Vietnam's candidacy for the Human Rights Council – and the campaign of the bloggers network – provides an opportunity for Sweden and Freedom Online Coalition to increase the pressure on Vietnam to ensure its legislation complies with international human rights standards. An important step could be to bring the issue up in the UN General Assembly, which elects the Human Rights Council. And the important moral support to the bloggers must go on.

* Source: [Civil Rights Defenders](#)